



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

The Hourglass (Sanatorium pod Klepsydra) by Wojciech Has
Adam Garbicz

Film Quarterly, Vol. 28, No. 3. (Spring, 1975), pp. 59-62.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28197521%2928%3A3%3C59%3ATH%28PK%3E2.0.CO%3B2-I>

Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

REVIEWS

itself. The vigor of *Alice* arises in large part from a similar confrontation—between the elements loosely described above as “too neat” and “not neat enough.” I am referring here not to the simple oppositions between studio and location, planning and improvisation (since *Mean Streets*, which incorporated all of these, lacked the particular quality of *Alice*), but to a flexibility or unexpectedness in the matching of form and content (or language and message). It is the continual shifting of modality between the schematic and the diffuse which stimulates the viewer to adjust his/her mental focus, and thus discover fresh implications in *Alice*’s odyssey.

My praise of flexibility is not meant to be normative. These criteria do not apply to films which present a closed world of their own, like *Marienbad* or *2001*. They may apply to other films which claim to present part of the real world. But I am using them here only to distinguish between *Mean Streets* and *Alice*. Of course, it may be argued that *Mean Streets* presents a closed world—literally, in being exclusive to one ethnic group in one neighborhood, and figuratively, in belonging to Scorsese’s memory—and the critics who praised the film no doubt saw it that way. But I could see it only as a real world reduced to an *objet d’art*, impressive to look at but hermetic.

Alice is equally impressive to look at. It also opens up and lets you inside.

—WILLIAM JOHNSON

THE HOURGLASS*

(Sanatorium pod Klepsydra) Director: Wojciech Has. Photography: Witold Sobocinski. Script: Has, from writings by Bruno Schulz. Music: Jerzy Maksymiuk. Film Polski.

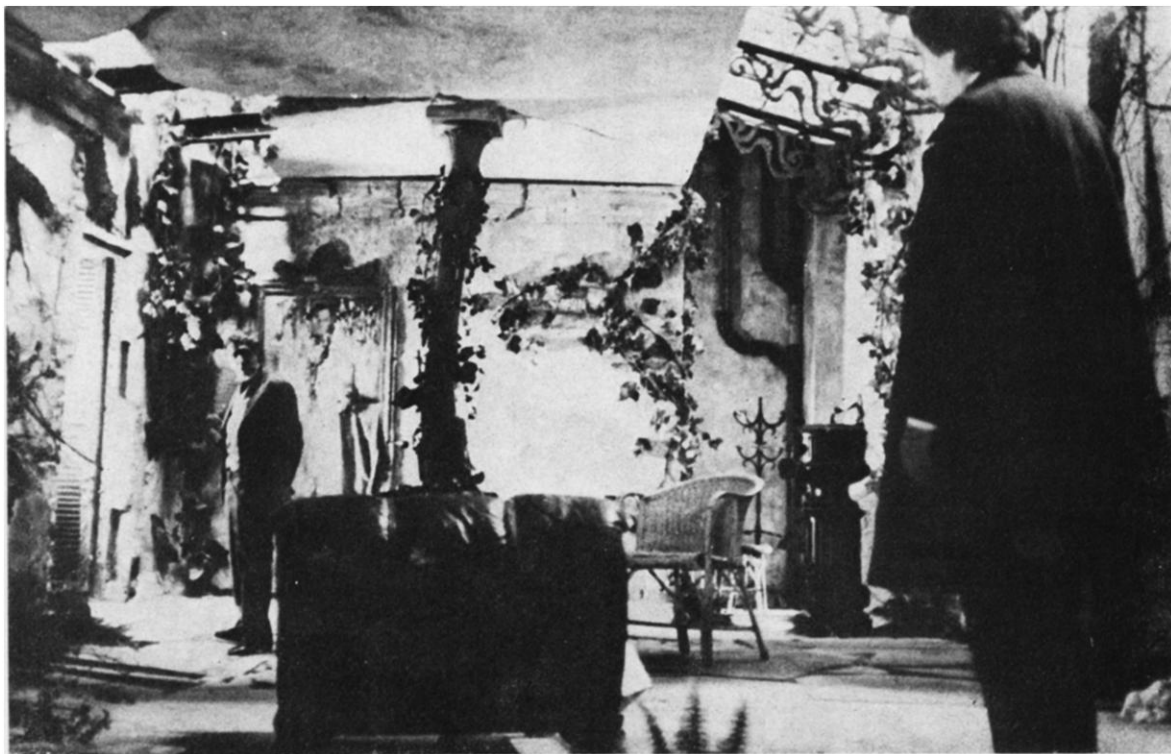
To talk about this dream-like picture one must first consider its source: the writings of Bruno Schulz. Has openly states that the sole *raison d’être* of the film, on which he worked for five



Has's THE HOURGLASS

years, is his fascination with the work of a man whose talent was of international rank, but is nonetheless one of the least known authors even in his home country. Born in 1892, Schulz was a provincial drawing teacher in Drohobycz, a small town in southeastern Poland. He wrote little, did not seem to attach much importance to the activity, and did not venture beyond short stories. All that he left behind can be contained in a single volume. He published two collections of stories (in 1934 and 1937), but they attracted comparatively little interest. To use an easy paradox, his prose was simply too good. It was related to surrealism and expressionism, bent on autobiographic introspection, tied very intimately to the personality of the author’s father who is depicted in half-heroic and half-grotesque tones, and above all it was deeply rooted in small-town Galicia. Formerly an Austrian crown-land and after 1918 again a part of Poland, Galicia was a most curious country. Someone who does not have firsthand experience of this conglomeration of dignified poverty, vivid intellectual temperaments, Jewish enterprise, and picturesque handicrafts will not understand

*The film’s Polish title, like that of the literary original, plays upon the double meaning of *klepsydra*: (i) hourglass, (ii) obituary notice. A full rendering as *The Hourglass Sanatorium* would seem more indicative of the spirit and connotations of the work.



Has's curious Galician atmosphere

fully the Galician spirit—unless he penetrates through *The Hourglass*. For one value of the film is beyond question: the inspired accuracy of description of the writer's world, a world which was to vanish irrevocably during World War II. This aptness of description is not fortuitous. Has is a Galician by birth, by temperament, and by choice, and his tastes, particularly visual, have their roots in the *fin de siècle* artistic avantgarde of Cracow. The work of Schulz had fascinated him since early youth.

Surrealism and expressionism, autobiographic introspection, dramatic struggle against provincialism, close ties with a concrete and very specific milieu: does this make Schulz's writings comparable to those of Franz Kafka? They are in some respects comparable, but in others very different. Schulz (who as a matter of fact translated *The Trial* into Polish) covers a wider spectrum of moods and situations and does not allow himself to be overawed by the incomprehensible social machinery, but rambles freely through the labyrinth of his literary world, penetrating it with his space-time metamorphoses, brushing the

dust from his shoulders with an indulgent smile—while Kafka appears to bow under the weight of his dust. Schulz seems more at ease, is more lyrical, full of specific magic and autumnal wit. The stigma of tragedy was added to this portrait only by history, on whose orders Schulz was shot in 1942 in the street of the Drohobycz ghetto. Has remembered this and his film is an elegy in which the memory of the destruction of Galician Jewry is an important element.

While talking about keys to the understanding of *The Hourglass* one must state that the immediate image on the screen is in a sense independent of the higher level of meaning—in other words the film defends itself well without help from symbolism, philosophical conclusions, or the literary original. The reasons for this will be found in the extraordinary lightness of direction. Has is very far from the all too common desire of directors to say everything in minute detail, to haul across the screen Hidden Meanings and make Important Points. His work is characterized by a sense of following the right path, the quality which allows the adoption of dancing pace and good humor. It is just in this

same mood that *The Hourglass* should be received—without jumping eagerly at the suspected metaphors, without pursuing the evasive logic of the narrative. One should simply subject oneself calmly to the film, *feel* it rather than *watch* it, float on the waves of its tracking and panning shots, relish its visual imagery which Has serves liberally, for example in the scenes of the Sabbath feast.

All this does not of course mean that, with all its sense of humor, the picture amounts to a fairground display, a visual toy like Has's *Saragossa Manuscript*—not that Schulz's writings are less amenable to such treatment than was Potocki's novel. The point is that *The Hourglass* is *not* a film adaptation of the short stories in question. It is rather an improvisation on literary themes, an elegiac vision of their world. The director himself describes the film as a dream about death. An attempt at a literal transfer to the screen of such literature would be doomed, at least in the present state of the language of the cinema, simply because the fabric of Schulz's surrealist imaginings is very often the language itself and not the images formed through its medium. If we come across in his work instances of thinking in images, it is almost always done in the form of phantasmagoric transformations of surrounding people and objects, visions attacking several senses at once, supplied in the first person singular. Take an example from the short story which lends its title to the film:

A few days back I wrote to a book-dealer about a certain pornographic book. . . . I entered my father's shop. . . . The reply had arrived. I opened the letter and began to read in the weak light diffusing from the door. I was advised that the book I demanded was unfortunately not in stock. In the meantime the firm took the liberty to send me, without obligation, a certain article which was expected to arouse my undoubted interest. Then followed a description of a collapsible astronomical telescope of great light-power and multiple other virtues. Curious, I took the instrument out of the envelope . . . and began to assemble it. . . . It was something in the manner of an oblong automobile made of canvas, some theatrical prop which sought to imitate the solidity of the real world with a light fabric of paper and stiff tarpaulin. I looked into the black funnel of the eye-piece and saw in the bottom the

barely looming outlines of the yard of the Sanatorium. My interest aroused, I squeezed myself deeper into the rear chamber of the instrument. Now I followed in the field of vision of the telescope a chambermaid walking along the half-dark corridor of the Sanatorium. She turned back and smiled. Can she see me? I wondered. Irresistible drowsiness veiled my eyes with mist. I was in fact seated in the rear chamber of the telescope, as if in a coach. A light touch of the lever and the instrument began to rustle and flutter like a paper butterfly; I felt it to move with me and turn towards the door. Like a big black caterpillar the telescope rode into the brightly lit shop—an enormous paper cockroach . . . The shop-assistants threw the doors to the street open and I drove out slowly in this paper automobile, through a double row of guests who with shocked glances followed this veritably scandalous exit.

The above passage explains why Schulz is not bodily transferable to the screen: literal filming would either be lost amid technical tricks or would repel with its hermetic strangeness. On the other hand, Has did not intend to make a cinematic essay-reminiscence, and so he based himself on fragments of the plots of many short stories, and condensed within the framework of the plot of one of them the most interesting and most characteristic motifs of Schulz's work, while providing his own directional comment in the film's sets. Not surprisingly so: the personal stamp of Has's films, their center of gravity, lies in their imagery, whose main elements are the characteristic post-expressionist lighting and ornamental sets. The latter are more often than not designed in close cooperation with Jerzy and Lidia Skarzynski. The impressive effects of the collaboration were seen in *The Saragossa Manuscript*, but there the main concern of the designers was with taste and brilliance. Here, the aim was to resurrect from the ashes a certain reality, as seen through the eyes of the fantasist. While the hero travels to the sanatorium where his father is re-animated, thanks to manipulations with Time, Has carries out a parallel cinematic journey whereby he brings back to life a vision of Galicia of the thirties, using the time-tricks the cinema has to offer. A friend who was five minutes late for the film later said he could not make head or tail of it. Indeed, without its frame Has's film loses its balance; but this is in

fact a proof of its coherence. On the other hand, any further metaphors and associations which may occur to one are not to be taken too seriously; Schulz did not care much for metaphors and Has follows him in this respect—references and hints are not of vital importance for the narrative, even the fact that the resurrected Galicia has the colors of a painted corpse, at once more vivid and more morbid than reality, like the flushed face of a consumptive.

Some might complain that the frame of the film, the train journey, is now a hackneyed device. True, among others it was used in an identical form in another Polish picture, Konwicki's *Salto* (1965). The point is, however, that the train journey was the idea of Schulz himself, as a journey to a different dimension of past reality. Moreover, in *The Hourglass* the opening train journey has associations with transport to a concentration camp, just as the final flight of the Jews from a deserted town brings to mind the Nazi ghettos.

Thus the screen replica of Schulz's work is very much a director's vision of his world, his motifs, and his magic transformations of a provincial landscape. Has rules over it according to his own dictatorial laws, setting in motion the logic of a dream and claiming total freedom of associations. Is not all that easy? Does it do justice to the literary material? In other words, does it deserve any particular credit?

It certainly deserves credit. If Schulz's work can be brought to life on the screen at all, it is hard to imagine this done in a fuller form. Similarly, having decided to make a *film onirique*, Has achieves an outstanding result within the loose framework of this genre. *The Hourglass* is not only faithful to a certain literary atmosphere and a certain bygone kingdom—it is also

directed with mastery. Only perhaps not *constructed* with mastery: the coherence of the picture is somewhat disrupted by the frequent exotic inserts originating from "The Spring," another short story by Schulz. One can have some sympathy with Has who, while trying to convey the spirit of Schulz's work fully, could not deny himself these odd inclusions. All the same, these Caribbean fragments are something of an alien body. Apart from that there are in the picture certain lapses of dramatic tension which cannot be excused either by the character of the story or by visual considerations. The latter at least provide welcome relief for those viewers who are more resistant to Has's kaleidoscopic collection. Like Paradzhanov, he has a feel for a beautiful object; he knows, like Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky, how to invest objects with a bygone charm; like Visconti, he can create with objects a rich splendor. Perhaps Has cannot give the background a compulsive dynamic power, as Fellini can, but he still displays his wares with great fluency. On the other hand, this fluency is somewhat disrupted not so much by the editing, as by the characteristic manner of embarking on a shot which Has employs—setting the camera in panning or tracking motion at the very same instant in which the actor begins to move. This is a source of some stiffness, but then it can hardly be blamed on the actors.

The cast was chosen with care and insight; Gustaw Holoubek, the most intellectual of Polish actors, gives Doctor Gotard diabolical intelligence. Tadeusz Kondrat, whose face well suits the personality of the father metamorphosing on the pages of the book into a quasis-bird, delights with his croaky-voiced good nature and his ability to bear the onus of everyday commonplaces. Finally Jan Nowicki, ironic and relaxed but at the same time intimately involved in making the acquaintance of the mysteries of a magic world, plays the part of a guide, a medium, and an explorer who is being initiated. Nowicki's discreet affection towards the father, his brisk curiosity for the Sought and intelligent, melancholy surprise at the Found, contributes a good deal to the variety of moods of *The Hourglass*.

—ADAM GARBICZ

